

Tracy Daub
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Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-28

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Do you ever think about God having a name? Christians typically refer to God as “God” which is really not a name but a noun used for any deity. We might call God “Lord” but that is really more of a title than a name. But in today’s story about Moses and the burning bush, God’s name is revealed. And as we might expect from God, God’s name is not typical.

Moses and the burning bush story is one of the best known stories of the Bible. We know the basics: how Moses sees the bush on fire and yet it was not being consumed, how God speaks to Moses from the bush, and how God calls Moses to go to the Egyptian Pharaoh and demand that Pharaoh liberate the Hebrew people whom the Egyptians had enslaved. Moses is understandably reluctant to assume this job and resists. But God tells Moses, “I will be with you.” And then Moses asks what he will say to the Hebrew people when they ask what is the name of the one who has sent Moses to liberate them? And God answers, “Tell them ‘I Am has sent me to you.’”

I Am is God’s name. In Hebrew, this name is translated as Yahweh. Observant Jews believe this name is holy and won’t speak it, but will instead substitute the word “Lord” for God’s name. In ancient times, people believed that a person’s name had power and contained important meaning. So it is worthwhile to examine this unusual name for God to discern what meaning and what power might lie within that name.

There is much mystery and ambiguity in the name “I Am,” as is fitting for the God of the universe. But there is also something God reveals to us in that name. When we think about it, the name “I Am” is more of a verb than a name. And that becomes even more evident when we

consider that “I Am” can also be translated as “the One who causes to be.” God’s name is rooted in the verb “to be.” Nothing can happen without the verb “to be.” God’s name is connected with the most essential verb of existence. And that squares up with our idea of God as the creator of all things. God creates. God calls things in to being.

But the verb “to be” is not just a verb of existence; it is also a verb of action. The “one who causes” is also a God of action. What we learn from God’s name is that God is the Great Verb of life and the Great Verb of action. We get a glimpse of this Great Verb of Life and Action in the conversation God has with Moses at the burning bush. This passage is filled with verbs. God says to Moses, “I have *observed* the misery of my people. I have *heard* their cry. I *know* their suffering. I have *seen* how the Egyptians oppress them.” Then God adds, “I have *come* down to *deliver* them, to *bring* them out of that land to a good land.” Lots of verbs everywhere!

But it is especially important to reflect upon the kind of verbs being used here in association with God’s name. The nature of these verbs reveal something essential about God’s very being. What we learn is that this God is a God who cares about people’s suffering. This God is a God who has compassion for the weak and the vulnerable. This God is a God who liberates those who are oppressed. God’s action is directed on behalf of those in great need. God’s name is tied to displaced and suffering people. What we learn is that God enters the world’s pain and suffering with action that loves, and that liberates, and that transforms. God’s name, shared with Moses in the context of his people’s great suffering, reveals the awesome nature of our God. I Am is a name of great power and great meaning.

And then God, the One who Causes to Be, uses yet one more verb. It may be the most frightening verb of all. God says to Moses, “I will *send* you to Pharaoh to bring my people out

of Egypt.” Not only is God a God of love, compassion, justice, and liberation, but God summons us to be people who participate in God’s love, compassion, justice, and liberation. God calls us to join in the work of the Great Verb of Life and Action.

The Great I Am surfaces again in the Bible but under a different name. This time the name is “Jesus.” But it is the same Great Verb of Life and Action we met at the burning bush. We see this as Jesus heals the sick, includes the outcasts, cares for the poor and marginalized, forgives sins, confronts oppressive forces, and works to liberate us from our internal and external darkness. Just like at the burning bush, the Great I Am does not turn away from human suffering but in Jesus, the God of Life and Action once again enters humanity’s suffering.

Jesus’ disciple Peter doesn’t understand this about Jesus. He believes Jesus is the Messiah but he has a completely different concept than Jesus for what that name “Messiah” means. Peter thinks the name Messiah means someone who will use conventional power and might to conquer their enemies, someone who will use force to dominate. But for Jesus, the name “Messiah” is rooted in an understanding of the Great I Am. And so Jesus reprimands Peter for the temptation Peter puts in front of Jesus—a temptation to divorce his identity from the identity of the Great I Am. Jesus joins the Creator by entering the world’s suffering with liberating love—even at great personal cost, even when it involves the way of the cross.

But then, just as God did with Moses, Jesus turns to his followers and summons them to participate with that Great Verb of Life and Action. Jesus says to his followers, “*You pick up your crosses and follow me.*”

That’s what the call to discipleship means: to bear Jesus’ name by following him into the world’s pain with liberating love, compassion, mercy, and justice. Because, despite what some leaders want us to think, there is still a pandemic going on in this country and across the globe.

There are still people getting sick and people dying from this virus. There are still people losing their jobs and their businesses in the economic fall-out from the pandemic. There are still children put at risk because their schools cannot safely re-open.

There are still horrifying incidents of racial injustice and violence.

There are still people who cannot afford medical attention.

There are still migrant children locked up in detention centers.

There are still people who have lost their homes to hurricanes and fires.

There are still people suffering from addictions.

In the name of Jesus, in the name of the Great I Am, we are to pick up our crosses and enter the world God loves, the world in need of love and healing, the world in need of compassion and justice.

That's what lies behind God's name. That's what the name Yahweh means. And that is what the name Jesus means. And that is what the name Christian means. And that is what the name Tracy or John or Steven or Margaret or Bill or Colleen or (insert your name) means when we let ourselves find our identity in the Great I Am.